

# India accuses Bangladesh of putting Hindus at risk

Rising tensions cloud attempts to mend vital partnership after Sheikh Hasina's ousting

BENJAMIN PARKIN — DHAKA  
JOHN REED — NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's India has accused Bangladesh's new government of failing to protect the country's Hindu minority, fuelling tensions between the south Asian neighbours and key regional partners.

Sheikh Hasina, the former prime minister of Bangladesh who was toppled this month after weeks of protests, was close to New Delhi and a linchpin of India's strategy to counter China and Islamist extremism in South Asia.

But India's support for her increasingly autocratic government, which ordered a crackdown on student protesters that resulted in hundreds of deaths, has sparked widespread anger towards New Delhi in Bangladesh. Sheikh Hasina fled to India last week.

In the ensuing violence, minorities including Hindus were attacked in many parts of Muslim-majority Bangladesh and hundreds reportedly massed at the Indian border to seek refuge in their predominantly Hindu neighbour. About 8 per cent of Bangladesh's 170m-strong population is Hindu.

The attacks have caused alarm and fuelled hostility in India towards Bangladesh's interim leader Muhammad Yunus, the Nobel Peace Prize-winning economist. Hindu groups have called for Modi's government to do more to protect them, with hundreds protesting in the Indian capital yesterday against the "atrocities" in Bangladesh. Modi on Thursday said that "1.4bn Indians are worried about the safety of the Hindus".

"Indians want the security of Hindus and minorities there to be ensured," said Modi, whose religious nationalist Bharatiya Janata party sees itself as a champion of Hindu interests.

Many in Bangladesh, however, consider reports of rampant hate crimes part of a disinformation campaign by Sheikh Hasina's Awami League, arguing that incidents appeared to be motivated by political affiliation. The secular party draws considerable support from minorities, and some attacks were against Awami League leaders who were Hindu.

The allegations are a serious complication as the countries try to mend a vital partnership. Bangladesh relies on



**Anger: activists in India protest against attacks on Hindu religious sites in Bangladesh**

Amit Dave/Reuters

its larger neighbour for trade and investment and New Delhi wants stability to prevent chaos spilling over its borders.

With Bangladesh's police having gone into hiding after the former government's collapse, there is limited hard information on the scale of violence. Bangladeshi Hindu organisations said there had been more than 200 attacks against minorities since Sheikh Hasina's fall. Rights groups such as Amnesty International have called for investigations.

"Our homes, our shops and our temples have been vandalised," said Kajal Ghosh, a 46-year-old Hindu pharmacist who was among dozens who gathered in Dhaka to protest against the violence this week. "People think that Hindus are supporters of the Awami League, so they tried to push us out of the country."

Touhid Hossain, Bangladesh's interim

foreign minister, said that regional policy would not necessarily change under Yunus. "India is a very important neighbour to us," he said.

"We have grievances among the people about Indian conduct of Bangladesh policy, particularly in the last 10-15 years . . . It's possible through friendly interaction between Bangladesh and India to remove these grievances."

Hossain said alleged incidents of violence received "disproportionate publicity in India" and many "have been because of political reasons, but not communal [religious] reasons". He said no violence was acceptable and vowed that the government was "hell bent" on taking action against perpetrators.

Sheikh Hasina's ousting was a strategic setback to India, which considered the Awami League to be its most dependable regional partner. New Delhi helped Sheikh Hasina's father, inde-

**'The stakes both in Bangladesh and India are too high for the relationship to fail or collapse'**

pendence leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, to break away from Pakistan in 1971.

Officials accused later governments, led by rival parties such as the Bangladesh Nationalist party, of being soft on China and extremism. Ties improved after Sheikh Hasina was elected in 2009, with India and its companies investing heavily to counterbalance China's Belt and Road Initiative projects.

Mutual mistrust is now widespread. Rajot Shuvro Roy, a 21-year-old Bangladeshi Hindu student at Dhaka University who helped organise anti-Awami League protests, called the attacks on minorities "horrific" but said India was "making some hyperbole" over them. "Sheikh Hasina wants to tarnish the image of the interim government," he said.

In India, observers fear Yunus's interim government will be softer on Islamists and that elections will pave the way for the BNP's return to power.

Indrani Bagchi, chief executive of the Ananta Aspen Centre, a New Delhi think-tank, said the violence was a "major issue for a BJP government".

A normalisation of the security situation, with many police stations reopening, should ease some of the strain. "The attacks on minority communities should die down," said Sarbhanu Nath, a research analyst at defence intelligence group Janes.

But Sheikh Hasina's continued presence in India is a complication. Bangladeshi authorities this week opened a murder investigation against the former prime minister for her alleged role in the police killing of a protester.

The two countries have an extradition treaty, but Sheikh Hasina's son Sajeeb Wazed said that she has not sought asylum elsewhere and will stay in India "as long as she wants to".

"The Indian government has always been a friend," he said.

Observers said they expected both countries to recognise that they must re-establish trust, even if it takes time. "The stakes both in Bangladesh and India are too high for the relationship to fail or collapse," said Constantino Xavier, a senior fellow at the Centre for Social and Economic Progress in New Delhi.

"India has got this paranoia about pro-China sentiments in Bangladesh," one diplomat said, adding: "The Indians are smart enough to see that they have to accept the reality and work with the new government."